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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0878

RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1687

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1878

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001786

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI STILL OPTIMISTIC ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: BEIRUT 1736

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Parliament Speaker Berri, suggesting he had not yet seen the Patriarch's list of presidential candidates, nevertheless was optimistic that he and majority leader Saad Hariri would be able to reach a consensus. If, however, they are not able to agree on a candidate, Berri rejected the fallback plan of having parliament vote directly. Berri complained that the March 14 majority was continuing to talk of using a half plus one vote and the need to respect UNSCR 1559 (whereas Berri would accept silence as opposed to his earlier desire to reject 1559 outright). He reiterated his plea for U.S. efforts to get Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun on board. Berri criticized the timing if Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's November 11 Martyrs' Day speech, but denied it was an attack against the French initiative to find a consensus president. End summary.

FAITH IN PATRIARCH'S LIST

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri at his office in Ain el-Tineh on November 15. Berri advisors Ali Bazzi (AmCit) and Ali Hamdan also attended the meeting. The Ambassador said the U.S. fully supported the French initiative to convince the Patriarch to submit names to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and majority leader Saad Hariri for their approval, expressing his hope that Berri and Hariri would be able to agree on a consensus candidate. Berri responded that, as he had just told Monte Carlo radio, he had confidence in the Patriarch. If the Patriarch provides consensus names, it will be possible, he said. The candidate does not have to be from March 8, but he cannot be against March 8 either, Berri added.

¶3. (C) Berri, who met with French FM Kouchner and Special Envoy Cousseran during their November 13-14 visit to Beirut, denied that he had discussed with the French a fallback plan whereby, if he and Hariri were not be able to reach an

agreement, all of the names on the Patriarch's list except the big three (Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, Michel Aoun) would go directly before parliament for a vote. This was not acceptable, he explained, because it would mean that a candidate whom one side does not view as consensual could end up being president, citing the example of Demianos Kattar, who Hariri reportedly rejected. If he and Hariri agreed on one or more candidates, they would submit their names to parliament. If they were unable to agree, they would continue their consultations in an effort to find an agreement. Berri confirmed that parliament could vote earlier than the scheduled November 21 session if he and Hariri reach an agreement sooner.

¶4. (C) Berri confirmed that the French had asked him to keep the names confidential to protect the Patriarch, agreeing, however, that the Patriarch should announce the fact that he had sent the list. On timing, he dismissed the need for the Patriarch to wait to give Berri and Hariri time to consult on the names before announcing publicly that he had delivered the lists, claiming the Patriarch's announcement would not create any pressure for the two leaders to make a quick decision.

SUSPICIOUS OF MARCH 14

¶5. (C) Berri criticized March 14 leaders, including Hariri, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, for continuing to talk about a half plus one vote. Jumblatt said it in a recent press interview, Geagea's people are saying it every day, and even Saad said it again today, Berri protested. Some even say March 14 is preparing Beiteddine Palace (near Jumblatt's home in the Chouf Mountains) as the next presidential palace, he added.

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¶6. (C) Furthermore, Berri continued, noting that he and the Ambassador had agreed not to talk about UNSCR 1559 (nor to bury it, the Ambassador interjected); Geagea is always talking about 1559. Hariri also called the Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon "behind by back" before Nasrallah's speech to pressure the Iranians to get Nasrallah and Berri to accept Michel Khoury as a candidate. Such activities make Hizballah and others think March 14 is merely waiting things out until November 23 (when President Lahoud's mandate ends) to proceed with a half plus one vote.

NEED TO GET AOUN ON BOARD

¶7. (C) Reiterating his plea (reftel) that the U.S. help bring Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun on board, Berri said Aoun, as the strongest Christian leader, is the only one who has the right to criticize the choice of president. He himself had worked to reduce Aoun's expectations, even though, he said, Aoun has the "right" to be president. The Ambassador noted that he had met with Aoun twice in the last week, but the General refused to consider a "plan B." Instead, he would sit back and watch and let the others decide, refusing to participate.

HIZBALLAH SPEECH "A MISTAKE"

¶8. (C) Asked about Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's inflammatory November 11 Martyrs' Day speech, Berri admitted that he was angry at first and complained to Hizballah that the timing was a mistake. If the speech had been ten days earlier, Berri would have accepted it, but on the day before the arrival of FM Kouchner, it appeared Hizballah was opposed to the French initiative. Hizballah reportedly reassured Berri that it still favored a consensus, to which Berri responded that the speech was still a mistake.

COMMENT

¶9. (S) We believe, despite Berri's suggestions otherwise, that he has seen the Patriarch's list. Berri's rather vague response as to what happens if he and Hariri are unable to reach an agreement suggests to us that, as usual, he is leaving his options open.

¶10. (C) Berri's efforts to get Aoun on board are probably in deference to Hizballah rather than out of any sincere concerns for the Christian community. We know he personally does not want Aoun as president, but by securing, with our help, a prominent role for him in the next government he can maintain March 8's alliance with the FPM and curry favor with Aoun's followers. It may be, too, that Hizballah has put a condition on its willingness to allow Berri to make a deal with Hariri on a president: get Aoun to step aside voluntarily first. Whatever the reason, Berri -- who pulled the Ambassador into a side room to make his points more strongly -- was focused intensely on the need to get Aoun to accept any solution deriving from the French initiative.

FELTMAN